Teaching Under Policy Cascades: Common Core and Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

Educational policies and initiatives significantly influence instruction in classrooms across the nation. This article presents data from a larger critical ethnographic study in an urban school in the United States during the school's first year implementing the Common Core State Standards. In this article, the author shares data from three teachers. The findings indicate a significant reliance of teachers on outside factors—in this case, the Common Core Standards and related Publishers' Criteria—for planning and instruction in literacy. The teachers' own professional knowledge base became eroded in the process of "*policy cascades*," and as a result, the teachers developed a learned dependency on outside influences for instructional decision making in the classroom.

Key words: Common Core State Standards, policy cascades, instructional decisions

Educators' decisions about literacy instruction in public schools have a long history of being constructed based on local and federal policies, national reforms, and dominant ideologies (Edmondson, 2004; Pasco, 2003). Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (US Department of Education, 2002), the government has taken a more visible and prominent role than ever before in classrooms across the country. In fact, educators often regard NCLB as an unprecedented entry by the government into affairs of public education that was once left to states and school districts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Related initiatives under NCLB, such as Reading First, have specifically focused on literacy instruction and have dominated and shaped many districts' literacy goals, curriculum choices, and assessment methods (US Department of Education, 2009). Other initiatives, such as Race to the Top, issue funding to schools based on their adherence to specific guidelines and requirements (US Department of Education, 2010). Teachers across the United States now face the newest reform initiative, the Common Core State Standards. Therefore, it is essential to critically examine the impact these policies have on the nation's educators.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are intended to provide common and appropriate benchmarks for all students, regardless of where they live (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010). According to the CCSS, the standards were necessary to prepare students for college and careers, to compete globally, and to ensure a path for the country's economic success. The authors state that the new standards represent "the best elements of standards-related work to date and an important advance over that previous work" (p. 3). A common argument for standards is that students cannot succeed in meeting the demands of the economy if they cannot be successful with more challenging work in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

Within the introductory section of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, there is a page devoted to what the Standards do not cover. One item states, "While the Standards focus on what is most essential, they do not describe all that can or should be taught. A great deal is left to the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). Additionally, within the document there is an explicit statement that the standards define what students should know, not how teachers should teach. The intent is that schools and classroom teachers should be the ones making the pedagogical decisions. Despite this statement, the supplementary document, entitled the Publishers' Criteria, makes strong pedagogical suggestions.

Publishers' Criteria

Coleman and Pimentel, two lead authors of the CCSS, developed the Publishers' Criteria. The document's intention was to guide publishers and creators of curriculum in aligning resources with the new standards (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). The authors present the tenets of the Publishers' Criteria as being focused on the most significant elements of the CCSS, and state, "By underscoring what matters most in the standards, the criteria illustrate what shifts should take place in the next generation of curricula, including paring away elements that distract or are at odds with the standards" (p. 1). This statement strongly suggests that the authors' intention is

to guide teachers to focus solely on the standards, prescribing what should and should not be included in instruction.

Although the authors state that their intention is not to dictate classroom practice, critics state this edict is indeed what may occur in some schools. The Publishers' Criteria denies teachers the opportunity to choose resources when all the materials available to them evolve from identical interpretations of what CCSS should look like in practice. Additionally, following the Publishers' Criteria instead of the original standards document lessens teachers' ability to make instructional decisions (Pearson, 2013). If school districts only emphasize the tenets of the Publishers' Criteria as they implement Common Core, the professional knowledge base of teachers will become devalued and replaced by pedagogical suggestions being made by individuals without any local knowledge of individual classrooms and students.

When educational policies and reforms—from NCLB to CCSS—start manifesting in classrooms, teachers often find themselves losing power over everyday decisions about instruction. Mandated testing and scripted reading programs that often accompany policies force teachers to relinquish control and to rely less on their own pedagogical content knowledge base (Pease-Alvarez & Samway, 2008; Shannon, 1987). These mandates can lead to teachers changing their own beliefs about instruction in order to match school districts' and administrators' beliefs, as well as narrowing their notions of what is taught as literacy (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004; Stillman & Anderson, 2011; Valli & Chambliss, 2007), thereby leaving teachers eroded by the force of these educational policies and initiatives.

Policy Cascades

The impact of policies and initiatives, like the CCSS, on individuals within school settings can be described using a cascades metaphor. When one thinks of cascades, it is easy to picture the forceful strength of the water plummeting down a cliffside. Cascades are often formed when a river is young, growing in strength over time. As the cascades fall, soft rocks and soil easily erode, while harder rocks take longer to wear away.

The formation and implementation of educational policy within schools can be much like a waterfall—or a *policy cascade*. I have created the term *policy cascades* to describe the process that occurs within schooling systems because of educational policies. Bikhchandani, Hirschleifer, and Welch (1992) introduced a related term, "informational cascades," in the field of economics. They stated, "An informational cascade occurs when it is optimal for an individual, having observed the actions of those ahead of him, to follow the behavior of the preceding individual without regard to his own information" (p. 992). *Policy cascades* are specific to the effects of implementing a new policy or initiative in education. They occur when teachers adopt the actions and ideology demonstrated by others above them in the hierarchical structure of a school system, after receiving information from those individuals. Thus, they have their own professional knowledge base and beliefs eroded. Many times, this erosion is hegemonic in nature, with teachers unaware that they are being significantly shaped by the beliefs and practices of individuals above them in the cascades.

In a *policy cascade*, the information begins with a small group of people who are in a position of power, much like the top of a waterfall. The cascade starts when the policy is "young," or at the creation and initial implementation stage, growing in strength as more states, schools, and teachers learn about it. Depending on the policy, the group at the top could be authors of standards, members of the government, or other groups that have decision-making power. As the information begins to fall downward, it typically passes through state officials, district administration, and building principals before it reaches teachers. Throughout the process, *policy cascades* have the power to erode the beliefs of the individuals they touch, and teachers will potentially begin to ignore their own beliefs and interpretations, and instead look at the actions of those who encountered the policy before them. This process reflects the theoretical foundation of critical theory; power relations that exist in all aspects of society mediate all thought (Apple, 1999; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). When certain individuals—often the classroom teachers—accept their position in the cascades as natural or necessary, the marginalization of those individuals is reproduced and continued over time (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011).

Policy cascades can form as a result of any new initiatives, whether local or federal. The ways that individuals implement policies in schools can also strengthen them. In the following section, I will share three instructional shifts associated with the CCSS that were part of the standards implementation in the classrooms of the present study. These shifts also held substantial power in the *policy cascades* shaping these teachers.

Common Core Instructional Shifts

Lead authors of the CCSS have identified three instructional shifts—text complexity, quality and range of texts, and text dependent questions—which are embedded, but not clearly defined, within the standards and are elaborated upon in the Publishers' Criteria (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). The following section presents literature related to these same three shifts, which were a considerable focus in this study.

Text Dependent Questions. The Publishers' Criteria emphasizes asking questions and encouraging answers that are strictly dependent upon the text the students are reading. According to Coleman and Pimentel (2012), "Eighty to 90 percent of the Reading Standards in each grade require text dependent analysis; accordingly, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions" (p. 6). Students can only answer questions that are text dependent by carefully reading the specific text that is being used in a lesson.

Advocates for this type of questioning assert that allowing students to respond to questions based on prior knowledge does not require them to attend to the text at hand (Student Achievement Partners, n.d.). Some literacy scholars feel that effective questions should stem from the text and should help students focus on key details critical to comprehension (Taboada, Bianco, & Bowerman, 2012). However, while there certainly is a need to elicit details from a text to respond to questions, using prior knowledge is also an important strategy that can significantly strengthen a student's comprehension of a text (Anstey & Freebody, 1987; Gallagher, 2011; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Additionally, the emphasis in the CCSS on text dependency can lead to a misguided view on what those types of questions should look like. Fisher and Frey

(2012) claimed that while text dependent questions do require responding with evidence from the text, these questions should involve more than just the recalling of facts. Instead, they suggested asking questions that challenge students to use the text to reflect and infer, as well as explore author's purpose, key vocabulary, and text structure. Shanahan (2013) also cautioned teachers against limiting the types of questions they ask to literal questions, and recommended questioning that encourages students to be interpretive about the details in a text. These broader types of text dependent questions can help teachers attend to this shift while still challenging students to think critically about text.

Text Complexity. The CCSS require the reading of text in a "staircase of complexity," asking students to read literature at or above grade level by the end of their school year. Appendix A of the CCSS contained the assertion that being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is necessary for high achievement in college, careers, and numerous life tasks (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). The document also includes the notion that moving away from complex texts is likely to lead to a "general impoverishment of knowledge, which, because knowledge is intimately linked with reading comprehension ability, will accelerate the decline in the ability to comprehend complex texts and the decline in the richness of text itself" (p. 4). By reading more challenging texts, students are expected to be more prepared for the wide range of texts they will encounter throughout their adult lives.

Many literacy researchers claim that students learn to read when they are taught using challenging texts and are allowed opportunities to struggle in order to practice strategies (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000). Advocates argue that students need opportunities to confront and navigate texts at their grade level, regardless of what their instructional reading level may be. However, some literacy scholars also warn teachers about increasing the level of text complexity too quickly (Allington, 2002; Fountas & Pinnell, 1999), or caution educators about starting the focus on complex texts too soon in primary grades (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013). There is also concern that students will spend too much time reading text that is too difficult. Allington (2002) stressed that students need to spend a large part of their time engaged in successful reading, "in which students perform with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension" (p. 3). While these and other researchers may agree that increasing text complexity gradually with readers is an effective approach to strengthening students' overall reading, the caution exists on how quickly this approach is done.

Balancing Informational and Literary Text. Beginning in kindergarten, the CCSS and Publishers' Criteria ask teachers to include an increase of nonfiction materials in their classrooms to achieve a balance of literary and informational texts (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). By reading a mix of classic and contemporary literature, as well as complex informational texts, the CCSS expects students to broaden their knowledge and perspective on a variety of subjects (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). By grade four, students should be encountering 50% informational, 50% literary text in their classroom. This amount increases as students progress in grades, with the balance shifting to a heavier use of informational texts.

Researchers in the field of literacy have written about the importance of including informational texts for all grades, but especially in primary grades (Calo, 2011; Duke, 2000; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). Some scholars believe the lack of informational reading in early grades can

account for difficulties later as students encounter a greater percentage of informational texts in and out of school (Duke, 2000). While there is much support in the literacy community for including more informational texts in classrooms, some scholars caution against a narrow focus only on nonfiction texts. Informational texts may be more challenging for students due to the content-specific vocabulary contained in many texts, requiring more extensive background knowledge than some elementary students have (Ness, 2011; Yatvin, 2012). Students, especially in very early developmental stages, also may have a stronger connection to and interest in texts that relate to their own lives, rather than topics with which they have limited experience (Yatvin, 2012). Additionally, when students are first practicing a newly learned comprehension strategy, they should encounter texts that do not contain additional difficulties to navigate such as extensive high-level academic vocabulary (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Choosing a well-suited text for students involves multiple factors, such as considering the learning objectives, the student's interests and motivation, and how much support teachers can provide.

Purpose of Study. The purpose of this study was to explore the question: How do elementary teachers plan and implement literacy instruction under literacy policies and initiatives? In the following sections, I will share the methodology used, including data collection and analysis procedures. I will then present and discuss the findings as well as offer an interpretation of how they relate to *policy cascades* and the field of literacy instruction.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

A theory of teacher knowledge, based on the notion that a teacher's knowledge base has several levels and is affected by numerous factors (Shulman, 1986; 1987), served as my lens at the onset of this study. This framework allowed me to examine what aspects of a teacher's knowledge base most significantly guided the planning and implementation of literacy instruction. I used ethnographic methods (Foley, 1990; Heath, 1983; Spindler & Spindler, 1992) to investigate the research question and to "make the familiar strange" (Erickson, 1984), as I sought to understand the common practice of planning and instruction through firsthand observation in the school setting.

I spent each school day over the course of three months at the research site in order to gain insight on what was "typical literacy instruction" for the teachers. The flexible schedule in teachers' classrooms allowed me to observe a variety of literacy activities, making three months sufficient time to focus on what influenced teachers' literacy planning and instruction. Several ethnographers maintain that it is often necessary, and at times even desirable, to conduct the fieldwork part of ethnography in a shorter time frame (Hammersley, 2006; Heath & Street, 2008; Spindler & Spindler, 1992).

Setting and Participants. This study occurred at Parker Hills Elementary (pseudonym), a K-6 urban school in the United States, enrolling approximately 400 students. Data from three teachers has been included in this paper: Nancy, first grade; Katie, third grade; and Andrea, fourth grade (all names are pseudonyms). All three teachers agreed to weekly observations of their literacy block as well as weekly interviews to discuss their reflections on the instruction that took place.

Data Collection and Analysis. Data sources included fieldnotes from firsthand observations of literacy instruction, interviews with participants, and physical artifacts collected. I spent approximately sixty minutes per week in each of the participants' classrooms during literacy instructional time over the course of three months. Additionally, through weekly thirty-minute debriefing interviews, I was able to gain insight into the teachers' perspectives about what influenced their literacy planning and instruction. Interviews were conducted individually at a time of day requested by the teacher, and in most cases, were held in the teacher's classroom. All interviews were audiotaped for accurate transcription as part of the data. Finally, I collected several physical artifacts to provide additional insight into the planning process of classroom teachers. These artifacts included lesson plans, handouts from professional development sessions the teachers attended, and instructional materials used in literacy lessons. Analyzing these physical artifacts allowed me to further understand the teachers' literacy instruction and how they understood and implemented CCSS.

Data Analysis. Analysis of the data was ongoing throughout the research study. I transcribed interviews within a day of the interview taking place so that analysis could begin immediately. All data was analyzed using coding. In ethnography, coding often involves line-by-line categorization of data (Charmaz, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The researcher looks for repeated and regular patterns of both action and dialogue that begin to characterize the group under study (Eisenhart, 2001). I began data analysis with the teacher interviews in order to understand the teachers' perspectives on how they planned and taught literacy. In the initial coding stage, I used "open coding" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), where the main idea present in each line of the transcription of interviews was indicated in the margins. For example, when Katie, a primary grade teacher, discussed the district assessments that she was responsible for and their alignment with Common Core, a code of "CC" was written to represent a reference to the Common Core, as well as a code of "AS" to represent a reference to assessment. After coding the teacher interview transcripts with these initial open codes, I conducted the same open coding technique with fieldnotes of classroom observation.

Based on the codes that appeared most frequently in the open coding stage, I next used focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In the focused coding process, I reviewed the common ideas that each individual participant repeatedly mentioned in the interview process as well as observed in the classroom. The Publishers' Criteria and CCSS were the factors affecting instruction most often, so I began to focus specifically on how the teachers talked about CCSS; this narrowing led to the focused coding. At this point, a critical perspective (Apple, 1999; Giroux, 1997) also influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. The following codes appeared most frequently in focused coding: Reference to/observation of text dependency (TD); Reference to/observation of shift to 50% informational text (50/50); and, Reference to/observation of text complexity shift (TC). I analyzed lesson plans at this stage with these same codes. This offered a third piece of evidence to show teachers' use of ideas related to CCSS recorded in the lesson planning stage. Finally, I used focused coding to do a cross-case analysis, looking at ways that the different teachers spoke about the same concepts.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary teachers planned and implemented literacy instruction under literacy policies and initiatives. Through data analysis, it became clear that CCSS and the shifts in the Publishers' Criteria were the most influential factors for the three teachers in the study, with the biggest changes in the form of how they used text. Teachers changed their use of text because of CCSS in three main ways: instructional shifts of text dependency, text complexity, and informational text.

Text Dependency: "Just dive in!"

All three teachers talked about a need to be more text dependent, which they interpreted as pulling back from the previous practice of building background knowledge with students. The teachers attributed this instructional change to the shift in the Publishers' Criteria dealing with text dependency. According to the teachers, text dependency and pulling back from activating background knowledge was encouraged in a video they viewed, in which examples of ways to approach (and not approach) a specific piece of text were given. After viewing this, the teachers felt they should refrain from the previous commonly used instructional practice of building background knowledge (Anstey & Freebody, 1987; Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

Each of the three teachers referenced this video when talking about text dependency. They all spoke about needing to change their instructional approach to let students just "dive in" instead of frontloading information, a practice they all stated was a shift in their instruction this year due to CCSS. Andrea, an intermediate teacher with four years of experience, referenced this specifically when discussing how CCSS changed her teaching this year:

> Andrea: I was frontloading a lot more information to my lower kids [last year]. Like, frontloading vocabulary. Things like that. But Common Core doesn't really want you frontloading a lot anymore. They really just want the kids to dive in.
> Author: Does the Common Core document say that?
> Andrea: I don't think it says that in the document.
> Author: Where does that come from?
> Andrea: The videos. The video we watched, that's where it comes from. They don't want you frontloading a lot so I can honestly say my instruction…my guidance is different from group to group, but I'm kind of just having them all dive in now.
> Author: So you're pulling back the frontloading because of the messages in the video?
> Andrea: Yes. Definitely. And I agree with that message.

Andrea's interpretation of the video clearly influenced her instructional decision-making, despite her acknowledgement that this is not a statement in the CCSS. She showed how the video heavily shaped her professional knowledge and practices, and how she shifted to what she believed CCSS "wanted her to do." This is a specific example of how *policy cascades* shaped Andrea's beliefs and instruction. She talked more about this on another occasion:

> Andrea: I did get better at letting them dive in at first on their own, before going back and reading together.
> Author: And that idea is from…?
> Andrea: Common Core. The Common Core makes me feel…I think before

I would have felt like a bad teacher doing that. Because all the trainings that you take, it's always…scaffold, scaffold, scaffold, and frontload…. All those things that you do, especially with ESL learners. So I think last year I would have considered myself a bad teacher to just tell my lowest reading group, I just want you to dive in. Try to read this grade level text and we're going to talk about it. But this year, I feel more confident doing that because I know that Common Core wants us to be doing it. To be giving the kids more independence and putting more of the accountability on them.

Andrea utilized what she was told about CCSS to give her permission to take this pedagogical approach, and to alleviate her feelings of being a "bad teacher" for doing so. I asked her if the messages in the video and other professional development sessions were similar to the research on literacy instruction she read:

> Andrea: No. Uh-uh. No, I don't think so. I think a lot of the pedagogy research that I have read is very much frontloading and you teach ESL learners with tons of picture support and all of these…it's a ton of scaffolding, I think, in what we've read in research articles and I think Common Core has really pulled away from that.

Despite being familiar with current research in the field of literacy and noticing the misalignment with her interpretations of CCSS, Andrea still altered her instruction in the way she said, "Common Core wanted." This is evidence of how strongly the *policy cascades* created by CCSS and the Publishers' Criteria shaped Andrea's own knowledge base.

Katie, a third grade teacher, also spoke about a shift to text dependency and less time spent on pre-reading. However, after teaching for more than twenty years, she also stated that she knew it was a shift she would make "when it was appropriate." She spoke about the conversation she said she heard repeatedly at trainings regarding the "no more building background knowledge" idea:

> Katie: I think that maybe that would be an example of where [our training] is interpreting something differently than I would interpret it. I wouldn't, I don't even know which standard that is. Which CCSS that is that says don't predigest things for kids… I hear a lot of teachers saying that…like in the training I was taking… some teachers at my table were saying that. Like, we're not going to do that anymore. But I think we have to do that. You can't just stop frontloading text, you can't not build background…

Katie showed more resistance to the effects of the *policy cascades* at Parker Hills than the other teachers in the study, but still altered some of her instruction based on what she felt was expected regarding CCSS implementation. Her comments are also evidence that she understood there was a difference between the actual CCSS and the information presented during trainings that stemmed from the Publishers' Criteria. Although Katie still needed to exist under the *policy cascades* and did make some adjustments to her instruction, the impact of the cascades was less forceful on her instruction, perhaps due to her longevity in the field and the critical stance she took on the information about CCSS.

Despite the significant impact building background knowledge can have on students' comprehension, these three teachers began to refrain from doing this once they received and implemented messages regarding CCSS and text dependency. This is a clear result of how the *policy cascades* eroded teachers' professional knowledge base.

Text Complexity: "They've Got to Read Hard Text!"

All three teachers reported using whole class instruction with grade level text more than they had at the beginning of the school year or in previous years. The teachers attributed this to the instructional shift related to text complexity. The CCSS authors state in Appendix A that students "must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school" (p.2). The influence of this shift in the teachers' instruction was evident by their use of grade appropriate texts with all students for the majority of the school day, along with an increase in whole class reading instruction.

The teachers referenced this shift as a reason for using grade level texts more frequently and using less texts at the students' instructional reading levels, which was a pedagogical shift for them. Andrea expressed that prior to this school year she differentiated the level of text she asked students to read on a daily basis. However, during the study, she switched almost exclusively to grade level texts with all students all the time—with the exception of the school's reading intervention time three days a week. She stated that using grade level texts with all students was crucial and that students "had to be pushed." When I asked her to speak more about this shift in instruction and where it stemmed from, she said, "Common Core."

> Andrea: Common Core is really big on text complexity right now, too. A lot of our professional development… we've seen videos of people who came up with the Common Core and they just don't want you to spoon-feed anymore.

Rather than gradually increasing the complexity of text, her interpretation of this shift—stemming from training she received—was to go directly to the use of grade level text with all students. She expressed that this was necessary for the students to achieve more on the assessments, as well as to be prepared for the reading they would do in college.

The use of repeated readings as a strategy with students was a common approach during whole class instruction. The teachers said they received the idea for this model from a video they watched, suggesting that students engage in multiple readings of the same text over several days, reading the passage once on their own followed by the teacher reading the passage aloud. If necessary, this strategy was to be repeated multiple times for "close reading" of the text. The teachers did not identify any additional strategies about navigating complex texts from this video or their trainings.

Katie and Andrea used repeated readings with an "exemplar lesson" that Katie received at a training and later shared with Andrea. Both teachers stated that while they enjoyed the lesson, they thought it was a "bit long" and "a little boring" for their class. They expressed that students who were able to read the text independently were bored during the second reading of it, and students who were not able to read it independently were off-task during the silent reading of it.

Despite these observations, both Katie and Andrea said they would try similar lessons because this was "what the Common Core wants literacy instruction to look like."

Another approach frequently used by the three teachers was round robin style reading. Round robin reading involves students being called on one after another to read orally to the class (Harris & Hodges, 1995) and its variation, "popcorn reading" (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009), is the practice of having students read in a random order, with the teacher or students stopping the oral reading to call on a new reader.

During one lesson, I observed Nancy, a primary teacher with eight years of experience, using round robin style reading with her whole class. She called on each student to read aloud one sentence from the story in his or her reading anthology. When a student struggled, Nancy read the sentence word by word and asked the student to echo read it back before going on to the next student. It took approximately twenty minutes to read the whole story in this manner. In an interview following this lesson, Nancy spoke about her use of round robin reading for the first time and why she chose this strategy:

> Nancy: I want to stick with that high standard of them being able to read complex texts. That's a big deal in the new Common Core. My kids, if they're reading at a level of cat, hat, sat….I cannot let them only read that text. I have to give them complex text at their grade level. Big big part of Common Core. That means they're going to read stuff that they can't read. Now that is like an oxymoron. But it's what we need to do for Common Core. … I'm going to the next level, because the Common Core is giving me confidence that they're able to do it.

Nancy decided the use of round robin reading was a successful approach to have students interact with grade level text. During the lesson, the majority of the students struggled with reading their sentence aloud, and Nancy later confirmed that only two of her students were reading at grade level. However, she viewed this approach as a way for students to gain access to grade level text, which she stated was significantly important for CCSS.

Andrea and Nancy were both observed using popcorn or round robin reading in their instruction, and while I did not observe this practice with Katie, she spoke about sometimes using it small groups. This strategy resulted in a disengaged reading of the text for students—they lost their place in the story, were observably off-task, and were visibly frustrated when asked to read aloud portions that were at times extremely difficult for them to decode. The teachers included this strategy as a way to have students "read complex text," despite extensive research suggesting round robin reading is an ineffective instructional practice (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009; Opitz & Rasinski, 1998).

I observed this focus on text complexity in classrooms and the teachers talked about it in interviews frequently throughout the study. While two of the teachers in the study continued to use some instructional level reading, all three teachers used more grade level text and whole class instruction with all of their students. The instructional shift in the Publishers' Criteria related to CCSS became a significant part of their pedagogical knowledge base.

Informational Texts: "It has to be 50/50!"

Another shift that teachers regularly referenced and I observed in this study was an increased use of informational texts. Within the CCSS document, there is a table showing that by fourth grade, 50% of the text students read should be informational (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). This shift is a significant element of the Publishers' Criteria as well. According to the teachers, their principal selected this shift as one to focus on throughout the school year.

When talking about how they planned their reading instruction, the teachers rarely expressed reasons for choosing a particular text other than the need to increase the use of informational texts. I observed this phenomenon in one of Nancy's lessons when she asked her first graders to select an informational text from their book box and write a topic sentence about it. After this lesson, Nancy shared some of her reasons for planning this lesson:

> Nancy: I chose informational text because of the Standard ….and because the new Common Core shift… to move to 50% informational text. So my lesson was also guiding them and saying look, this book is not informational…*this* book is.

Nancy used the shift to more informational texts as the main focus for her lesson that day. She did not focus on the structure of informational texts or strategies specific to that type of text. In fact, she stated that she originally had the same lesson planned for fiction texts, but switched it so she could "get more informational [texts] in." Nancy's understanding of the shift to increased use of informational texts became the sole justification for how she planned and taught her literacy lesson that day.

All three teachers spoke often about the need for 50% of the texts they used to be informational. Nancy and Katie used words like, "I have to use 50% informational text because of Common Core." Katie spoke about the shift in an interview:

> Katie: So when I'm planning, I'll say you know what? I need to get another informational text in next week. Because I need to get it closer to 50/50.
> A: Because of the shift?
> Katie: Yeah. Last year I started changing it so it was about 25% informational. But now I'm trying to make it more 50/50. So you know, that's what role it plays for me right now for reading and language arts instruction. Just trying to keep the shift in mind.

In the classrooms, this shift meant little use of the reading series that was used often in previous years. Instead, the teachers began using the science or social studies textbook for literacy instruction, and supplementing from online programs, children's news magazines, and occasionally other nonfiction picture books.

In Andrea's classroom, the shift away from the reading series was even more dramatic—she went almost exclusively to informational texts for all literacy instruction (while still choosing fiction for their daily read aloud) and used the reading series once. She stated that the students had primarily been taught using the reading series in previous years, and expressed that the series

focused too heavily on narrative text with very little informational. She linked this need to shift to informational texts to the CCSS.

Despite this shift in instruction, some teachers shared concerns about using mostly informational texts. Andrea talked about her decision to do one unit on fiction novels because of concern that the students would not do well on the assessments if she did not provide some instruction on literary texts. Although she still used informational articles each day, she had students reading fiction chapter books that they requested after stating they were bored with all the textbook reading and articles. Andrea spoke about her concerns:

> Andrea: They love reading books like *Flat Stanley* and *Wayside School*. It's more
> fun for them. Where with this (referring to nonfiction passage), they have fun
> with it but it's much more focused on those tough skills.
> A: Are you concerned about that?
> Andrea: Yes. Because of the Common Core shift, I think we're going to pull back a
> lot from books like *Wayside School* and things like that…

Andrea demonstrated her understanding of the shift to more informational texts as a classroom that rarely includes the fictional chapter books she was using with her students. This interpretation guided her pedagogical decisions and curriculum choices. Even though she saw her students' interest in these fiction books and recognized their value both personally and professionally, Andrea believed they should play little to no role in her classroom literacy instruction because of what she understood to be an aim of CCSS. This change in her classroom shows the impact of the *policy cascades* in shaping her educational decisions.

These three teachers remarked frequently throughout the three months of the study that the CCSS were the overall factor guiding what they planned and how they taught concerning reading instruction. The teachers held the shifts from the Publishers' Criteria as most important when they planned. If the teachers relied on their own knowledge base, they did not often speak about it, even when they shared their knowledge of existing research on effective literacy pedagogy. Instead, they turned to their professional development on the Publishers' Criteria and standards to decide what role Common Core should play in their literacy instruction.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers planned and implemented reading instruction under literacy policies and initiatives. Findings suggest that the CCSS and the tenets of the Publishers' Criteria teachers were exposed to in trainings had the most significant impact on literacy instruction for all three teachers. When asked why these tenets played such a significant role in their instruction, the teachers responded that it was what they *had* to do. The *policy cascades* heavily shaped their instruction, knowledge base, and beliefs about teaching, but the teachers seemed unaware of how much the cascades were affecting their teaching strategies. In the following section, I will elaborate on ways teachers often exist under the effects of *policy cascades*, which can lead to a learned dependency on outside factors and others' interpretations of policies and initiatives. I will conclude with suggestions on how educators might combat the impact of the *policy cascades*.

Policy Cascades: Shaping or Eroding Instruction?

The *policy cascades* at Parker Hills influenced all three teachers in the study. The systems of power began with the CCSS authors at the top, particularly those authors that later created the Publishers' Criteria. The cascades then flowed to the state and district level individuals making decisions about adoption and implementation of the standards, and finally to the classroom teachers who ultimately make instructional decisions on a daily basis and know the needs of students better than anyone else. Unfortunately, though, they are often left with the least power and control.

The teachers consistently stated that all their information about CCSS came from professional development at the district and building level, which shaped their understandings and interpretations of CCSS. As previously mentioned, Andrea disregarded the current research she read during a graduate program and replaced it with her understandings of what "Common Core wanted." All three teachers interpreted the CCSS in similar ways, and all focused on the instructional shifts in the Publishers' Criteria when planning and teaching reading. While these shifts are not inherently negative, they can lead to a narrowed view on curriculum, limited selection of materials, and a limited range of pedagogical approaches in a classroom.

When asked why the CCSS guided their instruction so significantly, the teachers used the same types of phrases—"they are more rigorous," or "they have to be college and career ready"—which are common sentiments associated with CCSS, and were statements the teachers reported hearing at trainings. Nancy expressed specifically that Common Core was "what she *had* to do." This statement is further evidence of how strongly the *policy cascades* at the school shaped the teachers, without teachers expressing awareness of the significant power the individuals above them in the cascades held over their day-to-day teaching decisions.

Every district is potentially susceptible to its own *policy cascade*, and different factors can change the way the cascades fall and which levels are most forceful. Many times, as in the case of Parker Hills, the *policy cascades* operate through hegemony, with teachers unaware of how much of their own knowledge base, beliefs, and instructional practices are significantly shaped by an outside source. When this hegemony occurs over many years, teachers might automatically look to someone else to make the educational decisions, rather than trusting their own professional knowledge base.

Learned Dependency: "Just tell me how to teach!"

One consequence of the *policy cascades* at Parker Hills was teachers developing "learned dependency" on outside factors when making decisions about their classroom, while ignoring their own knowledge base. I define "learned dependency" as an individual's reliance on outside influences, rather than internal factors, to make decisions and form beliefs, due to the significant presence those outside forces have had on his or her work and life for a considerable amount of time. Once these outside forces have been imposed upon individuals repeatedly over time, individuals may learn to depend almost completely on outside factors, rather than their own knowledge, beliefs, and ideas. This dependency can happen to very knowledgeable teachers for a variety of reasons: obligation to adhere to district expectations; pressures for students to perform

on assessments; or in some cases, because they have been teaching most of their career in an environment with heavy pedagogical and curricular mandates (Afflerbach, 2004; Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Pennington, 2007).

The three teachers at Parker Hills showed evidence of learned dependency several times throughout the study. Andrea expressed a need for someone to tell her how to "teach the Common Core," desiring more examples of scripted lessons and stating that she was more than willing to teach the Common Core exactly how the district wanted, but she needed to be "told how to do it." Nancy remarked that while attending a faculty meeting earlier that week, teachers told the principal they needed more CCSS lessons, and asked for someone "to just tell them how to teach." When teachers changed their instruction because of what they believed CCSS wanted, or when they replaced existing beliefs about literacy instruction with new messages they interpreted from professional development, they were showing evidence of the learned dependency created by the current *policy cascades*.

Existing under the structure of a *policy cascade* can wear away beliefs and practices of individuals, and can lead to a learned dependency in teachers, causing them to seek validation, information, and interpretation from outside sources. The intent of this study is not to critique the CCSS, nor is it to criticize teachers who must exist under *policy cascades*. Instead, the critique is of the structure of a *policy cascade*, and the resulting educational system in which teachers must exist, with someone else's interpretation of policy holding more power than that of the teachers who work with students daily. However, while *policy cascades* are forceful and dominating, teachers can build up resistance to their power through the development of a critically literate perspective and by administration valuing teachers' professional knowledge base.

Resisting the Impact of Cascades

Although the *policy cascades* are strong, teachers are able to lessen the impact of their effect. They can learn to navigate mandates and policies, but also utilize their local knowledge, or "knowledge gained from experience" (Pardo, Highfield, & Florio-Ruane, 2012, p. 11) to make instructional decisions. When teachers use local knowledge, they take into account their students' interests, social and cultural backgrounds, and attitudes of the larger communities. Initiatives like CCSS can be implemented in various ways in classrooms, schools, and communities because they have different local meanings. If teachers are encouraged to use their local knowledge of students and consider how policies can be adhered to while still looking differently from classroom to classroom, the ability of the *policy cascades* to erode away beliefs and practices of teachers could be lessened.

Another factor that can help teachers combat learned dependency and erosion from *policy cascades* is the development of a critically literate perspective. This perspective requires teachers to address relationships between schooling, culture, society, and politics, as well as dominant ideologies represented in policy, with certain groups' beliefs privileged while others are marginalized (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; McLaren, 1989)**.** A critically literate teacher recognizes the value of using literacy as a tool for people to become empowered, to challenge texts including policies, and to disrupt the status quo (Comber, 2001; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Shannon, 1990). When teachers are critically literate, they possess the ability

to evaluate critically any text they encounter. According to Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011), "the oppressive culture created in our schools by top-down content standards…is challenged" through a critical perspective (p. 166). Developing this perspective is absolutely crucial to teachers being able to help themselves and their students become truly empowered (Avila & Moore, 2012).

Teacher educators can help teachers develop a critically literate perspective by sharing strategies on how they can become critical consumers of research and policy, and help teachers understand that they should be shaping educational policy as much as it shapes them. In order to circumvent the detrimental effect that the *policy cascades* can have in the classroom, teachers need to develop their critically literate perspective by questioning policies, researching who is represented and who is marginalized in those policies, and applying their local knowledge while implementing mandates. Finally, school and district administration can support teachers in this process by encouraging collaboration through professional learning communities, where teachers can share ideas on how the new initiatives might look differently in classrooms, and ways to ensure their students remain at the center of instruction. Critically literate teachers are better equipped to recognize power relations, to enact change within their classrooms, and to make instructional decisions that keep students at the center. While this awareness does not erase all effects from a *policy cascade*, it is crucial to starting to regain control over one's classroom. Teachers are taught to be decision-makers, and should be encouraged to reclaim their roles as knowledgeable professionals in their classroom (Cochran-Smith, 1991) in order to take a stand as an educator with the power to interpret policy in the way he or she deems most appropriate for the classroom (Pardo, Highfield, & Florio-Ruane, 2012).

Becoming the Rock That Shapes the Cascades

Larger rocks are often what shape a waterfall, and critically literate, empowered teachers have the potential to become that rock shaping policy, defining the cascade, and regaining the power of a strong, knowledgeable educator in charge of professional decisions in the classroom. While *policy cascades* are not new in school systems, they become stronger when initiatives and policies are given more power to shape instruction. Common Core has been touted as the biggest reform to influence our nation's curriculum (Bomer & Maloch, 2011), and as an increasing number of districts begin to implement the standards or the Publishers' Criteria, they will likely become even more powerful. The CCSS are positioned as necessary, as a "redeemer" of education, and teachers who question the standards are positioned as being in opposition to students succeeding in college and careers (Pennington, Obenchain, Papola, & Kmitta, 2012). Teacher evaluations based on student achievement on high-stakes assessments creates even stronger pressure for teachers to comply with the expectations of the CCSS and their implementation. Educational standards certainly should shape instruction to an extent, but they should also *be shaped* by the everyday practices in schools, integrated with the local knowledge and context of each individual classroom (Roskos & Neuman, 2013).

Cochran-Smith (1991) referred to teaching with resistance to dominant ideologies as "teaching against the grain." This kind of teaching requires a strong critical perspective with an awareness of the influence of dominant ideologies embedded within educational policy. It also requires knowledge of the cultural, historical, social, and political contexts in which these policies are

created. Apple and Teitelbaum (1986) stated that even well-educated teachers could lose their confidence to design and teach well-crafted lessons as a result of the hegemonic implementation of policies in schools. However, teachers can unlearn dependency and become stronger under the deteriorating effects of *policy cascades*. Teaching this way requires protection from the strength of the cascade, and a way to keep one's own shape despite the rushing forces that flow from the top down. Only then will teachers find themselves in a position to teach in a way that is aligned with their own viewpoints, their professional knowledge base, and their understanding of educational research.

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